Working in Partnership to safeguard everyone on 'Changing the Story' projects

Written by Tony Cegielka (University of Leeds)

Principal Investigators, early-career researchers, civil society organisation staff, activists and experts in safeguarding in the international development research sector addressed the questions that we should be asking each other when working in partnership. You can watch the session here.

While identifying potential partners often relies on existing networks and a degree of happenstance, we often look for capabilities in each other that will help satisfy the funding call, and employ a group's social capital on the ground.

A mutually understood and workable approach to safeguarding should be part of the discussions that define a partnership. As Bond notes: safeguarding expertise that already exists in partner organisations should be harnessed, and those that do not have sufficient expertise or resources to develop their own processes should get the opportunity to build capacity and take ownership of their safeguarding approaches. The agreed solution should be explicitly addressed as part of a response to a funding call.

When should we have these conversations?

It was suggested that discrepancies in our mutual understandings may only come to light in the event of malpractice or adverse publicity. This may be due to not having anticipated the possibility (or underestimating the likelihood) of such an incident, and may expose an insufficiently comprehensive policy or response mechanism.

How and when, then, can a discussion scoping the diverse aspects of safeguarding build on goodwill and expertise on all sides to move from this 'response' mode towards an approach that can help prevent incidents?

How can we facilitate these discussions?

Active, collaborative co-learning sessions can help facilitate open discussion towards a mutual understanding of ethos and contextualised practice. Mindmap- or game-based activities with non-linear structures allow participants to choose how they begin the conversation, and elicit connections between ostensibly disparate aspects (e.g. research ethics, recruitment, participatory arts).
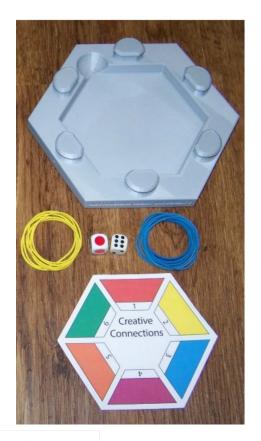
Key themes

The guidance has been constructed to utilise and respond to the consultation findings, by creating a grid/matrix to ask questions about safeguarding which inform actions by all who are involved in the research processes to **anticipate, mitigate** and **address** potential and actual harms in the funding, design, delivery and dissemination of research.

- **Anticipate** – as far as possible, working collaboratively with diverse partners/advisors, gather information on all the potential harms that your research/research call could inadvertently create or exacerbate

- **Mitigate** – take actions and put processes in place to mitigate the harms you have identified

- **Address** – take actions to ensure adequate processes to report, investigate and provide redress for any safeguarding harms which may arise.

UKCDR Guidance on Safeguarding in International Development Research 17 April 2020

Sheila Mburu gave notice of four key themes (below) that UKCDR identify as necessary to address. Their enhanced guidelines have since been published, and these suggest questions around each theme appropriate to the role of each stakeholder (such as research funder, ethics committee, Principal Investigator, research assistant, research participant or CSO member).

- **Rights of victims/survivors and whistle-blowers** – The rights of actual and potential victims/survivors of safeguarding incidents should be central, and there should be meaningful and effective pathways for support and redress.

- **Equity and fairness** – Involvement of all research partners at the research design and planning stage is necessary to ensure that research questions and methodologies are contextually appropriate and do not pose an unacceptable risk of harm to researchers, participants or communities. Responsibilities and rewards in the research process should also be clearly identified and fairly shared.

- **Transparency** – Transparent practice, policy and procedures for safeguarding form a touchstone characteristic of good practice. Transparency requires clear and public safeguarding commitments and policies, as well as openness about incidents or breaches and the measures taken to address them, while upholding confidentiality to avoid secondary trauma or harm.

- **Accountability and good governance** – Accountability is a significant feature of approaches to address and prevent harm and underpins good governance in the research process. In order for accountability to be proportionate and realistic, the expectations of all actors/partners in the research process must also reflect the distribution of legal responsibility, power and resources, as well as recognition of realities on the ground in often challenging contexts.

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Why might these discussions be challenging?

People involve themselves in 'Changing the Story' projects because they can envisage an alternative society. How, then, can we acknowledge and address uncomfortable truths in all our communities in order to give vulnerable people the confidence to contribute to that change?

In international development research, only co-development and adequate communication of policy and practice can mitigate the perception of safeguarding as an unworkable imposition from the Global North. Acknowledgement of the problem in Global North

societies does not necessarily mean solutions are transferrable or appropriate. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has highlighted from cases in the UK, though, three aspects echoed in our discussion:

- Things can change, and abuse is not inevitable. A zero-tolerance policy is feasible when co-developed and communicated among all stakeholders.
- Goodwill is a starting point, but abuse can happen unwittingly as well as intentionally. It can be perpetrated by anyone in any section of society.
- Concerns raised or allegations made bring no stigma or reprisal. They must be taken at face value if they are to be recorded and processed in a transparent way that brings closure to the individual.

Future webinars in this series

The importance was noted of how a team intends to monitor and evaluate any approach that is agreed, and how any learning from it might be transferred to existing and future CTS projects. Our next webinar will cover on this in early May, and will be led by Linda Hoxha, our Regional Lead for Europe, who has extensive experience in Save the Children's Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability & Learning (MEAL) approach.

Our aim is to facilitate informed debate. Suggestions for future events are welcome. Contact A.Cegielka@leeds.ac.uk if you'd like support in developing with your partners a workable approach to safeguarding.

TAGS: BOND   EVALUATION   MONITORING   SAFEGUARDING   UKCDR